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ABSTRACT

Teachers and administrators are becoming aware of a need for change in the approach to instruction for at-risk students. Traditional methods, while appropriate for many, are not meeting the needs of all students. In order for programs to be effective in dealing with at-risk students, these efforts must be comprehensive and meet individual student needs. One of the major responsibilities of the school is to see that every student is successful in learning. This paper examines several successful intervention programs described in the literature that target at-risk students. Fifteen recommendations follow that encourage: (1) a proactive approach to curriculum development; (2) increased school staff development; and (3) improved instructional leadership by the school principal. (Contains 19 references.) (Author)

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Programs of Assistance for the At-Risk Student

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Article Abstract:

PROGRAMS OF ASSISTANCE FOR THE AT-RISK STUDENT

Teachers and administrators are becoming aware of a need for change in the approach to instruction for at-risk students. Traditional methods, while appropriate for many, are not meeting the needs of all students. In order for programs to be effective in dealing with at-risk students, these efforts must be comprehensive and meet individual student needs. One of the major responsibilities of the school is to see that every student is successful in learning.

This study will examine several successful intervention programs targeting at-risk students. Fifteen recommendations follow that encourage: (a) a proactive approach to curriculum development, (b) increased school staff development, and (c) improved instructional leadership by the school principal.

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The At-Risk Student

At-risk is a term with varied meaning, usually having to do with low achievement and school failure. Risk factors are used to define students who may not graduate from high school. These risks include "low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, and attendance at schools with a large number of poor students" (Vacca & Padak, 1990, p. 486). Miller (1993) finds that there are five factors that contribute to a student's academic risk level. These include (a) poverty, (b) racial or ethnic minority status, (c) a single parent family, (d) a poorly educated mother, (e) and limited proficiency with English. Many students are trying to cope with three or four of these factors simultaneously. Seldner (1992) adds yet another set of factors that seem to identify those students who are at-risk of school failure. He considers: (a) those who have reading and math levels of a year or more behind grade level, (b) those who have been retained in a grade or experienced other academic failures, and (c) students with problems of adjustment such as self control or social control to be potentially at risk. Family circumstances, substance abuse, absenteeism, tardiness, and truancy are also conditions that must be considered (Seldner, 1992).

The Present Problem

One of education's biggest problems is how to reach the many students who have not been successful in learning under traditional teaching methods. At-risk students' problems only get worse each year that the system fails to meet their needs (Bergman & Schuder, 1993). Many of these students have developed

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negative attitudes about school because of the difficulty it poses for them. The problem worsens as students progress in school and are challenged by more difficult tasks (Mikulecky, 1990).

Teachers and administrators are becoming aware of a need for change in the approach to instruction for at-risk students. Traditional methods, while appropriate for many, are not meeting the needs of all students. In order for programs to be effective in dealing with at-risk students, these efforts must be comprehensive and meet individual needs. One of the major responsibilities of the school is to see that every student is successful in learning (Bergman & Schuder, 1993).

According to Duke (1993), the real problems that administrators face in dealing with at-risk students are concerning: (a) organizational factors, (b) interpersonal relations, and (c) attitudes that deny the value of instructional adjustments. One major problem is that many teachers give up on or abandon at-risk students. Once they have referred students to case conferences, teachers, at times, will not entertain additional suggestions for instructional modification. Administrators see the conference as a way to brainstorm ideas that could be used to help the student, but the teachers see the meeting as an occasion to consider alternatives to classroom interventions.

Another problem that Duke (1993) identifies for administrators is the resistance that is encountered from regular education teachers when administrators try to promote greater integration of regular and special education

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services. Most regular education teachers only see: (a) low-teacher ratios, (b) reduced academic expectation, and (c) an abundance of resources in the special education classes when they could be using the special education teachers as a resource for tips and insights concerning at-risk students' behavior and how to help them learn.

Duke (1993) also relates some complaints from teachers concerning the administrator's role in dealing with the at-risk student. Teachers complain that administrators do not take an active interest in solving problems. They think the administrator should attend all meetings, assign responsibilities, monitor progress, and schedule follow-up sessions to assess progress and adjust interventions. Teachers also feel that professional staff development is lacking in the area addressing at-risk students' needs. They feel that they could benefit from activities that focus on ways to assist at-risk students in regular classroom settings. It is the administrator's duty to plan for staff development, and according to Duke's findings, financial support can be more easily secured when it can be demonstrated that the staff development directly benefits the neediest students.

The Need for Planning for Appropriate Professional Staff Development

Administrators need to focus on learning how to help the students who are having problems in school. The goals of staff development should include:

1. Increasing the willingness and capability of classroom teachers to address the instructional needs of individual at-risk students.

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- 2. Utilizing the expertise available within the school district and community.**
- 3. Reducing the numbers of students who are placed in pullout programs, receive low grades, and drop out of school. (Duke, 1993, p. 30)**

It is the school's, and ultimately the administrator's, responsibility to see that every student is successful in learning. One way the administrator can accomplish this is by insisting that teachers use instructional methods with a demonstrated capacity to accelerate student achievement, especially at-risk students. In order for programs to be effective in dealing with at-risk students, they need to be comprehensive and intensive. It is crucial to assess progress frequently and strive to meet individual student's needs. Early intervention is critical because prevention is more successful than remediation (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

Effective programs for at-risk students are (a) comprehensive, (b) well-planned, and (c) include detailed teacher manuals, material guides, and other supportive materials. These programs are also intensive. They use either one-to-one tutoring or individually adapted computer-assisted instruction. An effective program frequently assesses student progress and adapts instruction to individual needs (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

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There is a real challenge presented with the attempt to educate children who are tired, hungry, perhaps abused, have no permanent home, and seldom have the kind of interaction with supportive adults so necessary for mental and moral development in their growing years. To succeed in school, most such children require special attention (Brandt, 1993). These students come to school with a variety of needs, among them the need to improve their self-concept and self-perception. Many options are available to educators to address these concerns, including the technique of using literature as a psychoeducational intervention tool. This technique has been studied extensively and shown to have positive results with a wide range of individuals. Literature has been used to improve the self-concept of learning disabled students and prevent self-concept problems. Miller (1993) describes a Literature Project that focuses on increasing the motivation of at-risk students to read and to improve their self-esteem.

By the time students are in the third grade, it can be predicted with remarkable accuracy which students will drop out of school. One of the most frequently used strategies to deal with at-risk students is also the least effective: retaining them. Another strategy widely used is the pull-out program. These programs provide instruction that is poorly integrated and disruptive to students' regular classroom instruction and label students. Slavin and Madden (1989) examined research on many different approaches designed to increase achievement of students in elementary schools. The programs that they deemed

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effective were divided into three categories: (a) prevention, (b) classroom change, and (c) remediation.

Prevention is critical because "success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the school years and beyond, but failure in the early grades does virtually guarantee failure in later schooling" (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992, p. 11). As a possible preventive measure, preschool has been found to have a long term effect on dropouts and delinquency but is not enough to prevent early school failure. In recent years another strategy, that of reducing class size, has become popular. Research has shown that small reductions have few, if any, effects on student achievement, but larger reductions may have a meaningful impact. So, while this may be part of an overall strategy for getting students off to a good start in school, it is not an adequate intervention in itself (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992).

Successful School Activities That Promote At-Risk Student Learning

The following successful programs describe efforts to provide assistance for at-risk students. Some of the activities mentioned will also be appropriate for students who are not at-risk.

Success For All

Success for All is another program that is explained and recommended by Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik (1992). This approach is a coordinated set of interventions over the years designed to prevent learning problems from developing in the first place and intervening intensively and effectively when they

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do occur. Prevention and early intervention are emphasized. Prevention includes: (a) the provision of high-quality preschool and/or full-day kindergarten, (b) research-based curriculum and instructional methods in all grades, (c) reduced class size, (d) non-graded organization in reading, and (e) involvement with parents. Early intervention includes one-to-one tutoring in reading from certified teachers for students who are beginning to fall behind in first grade and family support programs to solve truancy, behavior problems, emotional difficulties, or health/social service challenges. Success for All has experienced positive results in the reading performance of all students and on reductions in retention and special education placements (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992).

At-risk students often do not recognize their own capabilities. These students have experienced so much failure that they feel they cannot succeed. The first step in helping at-risk children is to help them analyze and recognize their capabilities and strengths. The Dynamic Assessment is one way of letting the student actively participate in the assessment process. It acknowledges what the learner actually can do and provides a positive experience. Many times, knowledge of what these students can do and of different learning strategies that they can use will create a willingness to learn and do (Kletzien & Bednar, 1990).

When assessing children and placing them in various programs, educators should remember that "the goal of assessment is not identification of a disability but rather the specification of the conditions under which a particular student can and will learn" (Brozo, 1990, p. 527). The purpose of assessment is to monitor the

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outcomes of instruction and to provide input information to the teacher and the pupil for the guidance and improvement of instruction and learning. Large scale assessments do not address the question of how to improve teaching and learning. Such data are subject to misinterpretation when applied to small groups or individuals (Schumm, 1992).

If educators are to ensure that all students attain an adequate level of basic skills, then schools must be organized differently. There must be a plan articulated through the grades to ensure that students achieve success at each step in their schooling. Prevention and classroom change must be emphasized while remedial programs should be used as a last resort (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

Roots and Wings

Roots and Wings is a school restructuring design being tried in Maryland. The two main objectives of this program are (a) to guarantee that every child will successfully complete elementary school, achieving the highest standards in basic skill (the roots) and (b) to engage students in activities that enable them to apply everything they learn so they can see the usefulness and interconnectedness of knowledge (the wings). One of the most distinctive and innovative elements of this program is an integrated approach to science, social studies, writing, and other subject areas called World Lab. Although basic skills are essential, students must also be able to creatively solve problems, understand their own learning processes, and connect knowledge from different disciplines (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1994).

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Learning needs to have meaning for students. Simulations, which are incorporated in the Roots and Wings program, provide an ideal opportunity to make information immediately relevant and can give students an emotional investment in the material they are studying. Roots and Wings also include supportive classroom and family activities such as Math Wings and Reading Roots. Students are involved in structured peer activities that provide constant opportunities for active learning and immediate feedback. One-to-one tutoring and after-school programs are employed to bring children up to expectations quickly (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1994).

The goal of Roots and Wings is to help most children succeed in mainstream classes, and, thereby, to minimize the need for long-term remedial or special education services. This program stresses preventive services and early intervention known as never-streaming. Parent participation is encouraged as are partnerships with area businesses. In every case, schools using the Roots and Wings program have witnessed improved reading performance and a reduced number of students requiring special education. Nearly every child can be helped to succeed in the elementary grades. Roots and Wings is an effective replicable design for total school restructuring that can be adapted to a wide range of circumstances and needs (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1994).

Continuous Progress

There are several other programs that have also proven effective in dealing with the at-risk student. Continuous progress is one such program. Students

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progress at their own speed in small groups consisting of students at their own level. Groups are often composed of different ages and grade levels, but students are performing at the same academic level. Assessment and regrouping are done frequently as the students progress (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is another effective way of dealing with at-risk students. Students work in groups of mixed ability and are rewarded based on the learning of individual members. Better students serve as peer tutors for slower learners (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Each participant within a group is assigned a responsibility with the expectation of success. Duties depend on the ability of each student; however, all students are involved in the learning activity.

Mentorship Project

The mentorship project is a process to affirm the students' self-worth and develop his/her confidence and ability to be an independent decision maker. An opportunity is provided for an informal and confidential relationship between the student and a faculty member. Trust and flexibility are crucial elements, as are funds for motivational purposes. Administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors are all key players in this project. Some of the objectives of the project are (a) to affirm the at-risk youth's ability as a competent decision maker, (b) to provide the at-risk youth with a channel of communication, (c) to provide an environment in which the student feels accepted and respected, (d) to encourage discovery of school resources, (e) to develop and promote patterns of responsible

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and independent behavior, and (f) to establish a school-wide collaborative effort to intervene with youth declared to be at-risk of school failure (Seldner, 1992).

Instructional Technology Intervention

Practice, research, and literature suggest that learning activities delivered with a variety of technologies are especially useful and appropriate for at-risk students. Technology is effective in producing positive attitudes toward learning and promoting success for low achievers. At-risk children require concrete learning activities and the use of computers and newer technologies allows educators to match schoolwork with learning preferences. The "participation hypothesis" states that "the more involved we are in the process, the more likely we will learn what we are doing" (Hancock, 1992, p. 84).

More than any other group, at-risk students need the benefits and high support that carefully planned technology programs can provide. Technology serves (a) to affirm students' strengths, (b) to offer students learning resources that complement and enhance their ability to learn, and (c) to help students overcome economic disadvantages by accelerating performance outcomes as was never possible in the past (Hancock, 1992).

Avoiding Learned Helplessness

As stated before, in most cases, at-risk students experience difficulty in many different areas, but it has been found that these students are more "academically vulnerable" in classes requiring them to read (Vacca & Padak, 1990, p. 486). Some have never learned to read and others can read but avoid it

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whenever possible. This can be attributed to learned helplessness, or thinking they cannot succeed.

Learned helplessness can be caused by several factors:

- 1. Lack of knowledge of reading process - This occurs when students do not understand a reason for reading or what their roles should be as readers.**
- 2. Lack of self-image - At-risk readers often see themselves as incompetent. They will not read because they do not think they can read successfully.**
- 3. Lack of reading attitude and interest - Students are at-risk in reading when they fail to value reading as a source of information and enjoyment.**
- 4. Strategy repertoire - To experience control over their own reading processes, at-risk students need to know how to analyze a reading task and devise plans for reading, how to construct meaning from reading and how to get out of trouble when they run into obstacles while reading (Vacca & Padak, 1990, pp. 487-488).**

The goal of administrators and teachers of the at-risk student should be to help the learner realize his role as a reader and learner. In addition, the learner should be assisted with his development of: (a) a positive attitude about reading,

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(b) an interest in reading, and (c) using reading strategies to insure academic success (Vacca & Padak, 1990).

Whole Language

A whole language approach to teaching can improve the academic performance of learning disabled students. The whole language philosophy respects a student's individuality and makes literature an experience rather than a learning tool (Fuhler, 1993). Whole language instruction embraces the idea that learning to read is a social interactive process that requires the use of interesting, relevant, and authentic texts. Whole language educators believe that teachers should not be held to prescribed curriculums and textbooks. Activities should be planned in a variety of contexts. Each lesson should contain curricular goals, and learning activities should fall within these goals. Every activity should be a logical and appropriate part of the overall scheme of the curriculum rather than an isolated activity, and it should provide authentic language learning opportunities (Jordan & Smith, 1992).

Whole language teaching/learning is very beneficial to language impaired and learning disabled students. It creates a climate for improvement because it compensates for the factors that cause these students the most trouble. With whole language, each professional that works with a student complements other teachers' efforts because of the coordination of the program. The Program of Assisted Studies and Support Program (PASS) developed by Zucker (1993) used whole language to enhance the literacy development of learning disabled students.

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The goal of his successful program was to attain higher levels of literacy, improve communication skills, and ensure that students develop a perception of themselves as competent language learners who would become successful readers, writers, and learners (Zucker, 1993).

Summer Sessions

Summer school sessions are often used to offer at-risk students opportunities to earn credits that they missed during the school year. In elementary school, this process keeps students from being retained in a grade. However, traditional summer remedial programs have limited success, showing that conditions under which students are asked to learn should be modified. Cale (1992) describes a flexible program he, as principal, incorporated at his school. He began with identifying eligible students. Only students failing core classes and within ten points of passing were allowed to participate. A parent-teacher-student conference was held where an agreement was reached about the amount of work to be completed and the required level of proficiency. Work was designed to be completed independently with the help of teachers, who acted as resource persons. Students signed a contract agreeing to the amount of work. There was no set time for classes. Students were free to come and go as they pleased. The only requirements were to complete the assigned tasks at the agreed proficiency rate and to log at least thirty hours of attendance over a six-week period. Most students took the program very seriously and successfully completed all of the requirements. In fact, many of the students, after completing the summer

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program, had demonstrated a trend toward stronger classroom performance (Cale, 1992).

All students can succeed when taught in ways appropriate to their needs and with needed assistance. More time and a flexibly designed opportunity to accomplish the set of competencies may be all that is need. Summer sessions are an excellent way to provide both. "Flexible summer sessions combine aspects of mastery learning and outcome-based education. The sessions can be relatively inexpensive and well-received by faculty and students" (Cale, 1992, p. 107).

Write to Read

According to Pickles-Thomas (1992), the principal is in a position to create an atmosphere where children are excited about learning to read and write. The principal must play an active role in helping to determine the philosophy and tone of the reading program in the school. Pickles-Thomas, as an elementary school principal, implemented the "Write to Read" program in her school. A box was placed on a school counter. Students who wished to read aloud to the principal wrote a letter asking to read and telling a little about the book they wished to share. The principal would then call them to the conference room sometime during the day to read and discuss their book. As the program grew, with more and more students wanting to read, parents, the librarian, volunteers, and others were included to listen as students read.

The "Write to Read" program is an example of the role principals may assume in offering instructional leadership that will bring about a change in

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student attitude and achievement. The principal is in a position to cultivate a positive climate for learning (Pickles-Thomas, 1992).

Professional Staff Development

Duke (1993), who served as a director of professional staff development, found that one of the most frequent concerns of teachers and administrators involved instruction for at-risk students in regular classrooms. He developed a model for assisting educators in performing their instructional roles more effectively. He defined at-risk as any student with a grade of "D" or "F" at the end of the first grading period. Low grades are known to be correlated with: (a) poor attendance, (b) behavior problems, and (c) dropping out of school. Student-Based Staff Development (SBSD) is a model for assisting teachers to perform their instructional roles more effectively. It focuses on early identification of students experiencing academic problems and speedy delivery of customized training within individual classrooms. There is also a focus on assisting teachers in collaborating to assess their needs and share intervention strategies. SBSB provides the link between development of assistance plans for individual students and staff development. It calls for a restructuring of staff development with on-site training to assist individual students (Duke, 1993).

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no doubt that America's schools face a problem-- that of educating the many students who come to school already at-risk of failure. The education of these students involves many individuals. It is not simply a matter of

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the classroom teacher being involved in making sure these students are reached and receive a sound education. The administrator is or should be very involved in making educational decisions involving these and all students. This study has shown that the role of the principal as instructional leader is vital.

As stated in the introduction, there are many avenues open to school officials to aid these at-risk students in academic success. The first step is early identification of the at-risk student. Many children fail to learn to read adequately in the early grades. These students are (a) retained, (b) assigned to special education, or (c) placed in remedial classes. Not only are the financial costs of providing long-term remedial services staggering, even more tragic are the consequences for children who fail so early. The idea of prevention and early intervention rather than remediation is rapidly growing in our country. A growing body of evidence shows that failure can be prevented for all students except the most retarded and the programs and practices that have the strongest evidence of effectiveness for preventing school failure for virtually all students are available and replicable. School failure can be prevented if at-risk students are provided with a coordinated set of interventions over the years assigned to prevent learning problems from developing in the first place and intervening intensively and effectively when they do occur (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992).

It is clear that there is no magic solution that will ensure the success of at-risk children throughout their school careers and beyond. "However, it is equally clear that children must successfully negotiate key developmental hurdles in their

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first decade of life, and that we know how to ensure that virtually all of them do so" (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992).

In order to promote learning for all students, including the at-risk student, principals must play an active role in determining the philosophy and tone of the programs used in their school. As the instructional leader, the administrator is responsible for setting the tone for the school and demonstrating how the programs could work. Instructional leadership by the principal can bring about a change in student attitude and achievement. The principal alone, however, cannot ensure the success of any program. It takes a cooperative effort by all involved (Pickles-Thomas, 1992).

Since the purpose of education is to aid all students in becoming productive members of society, educators must use methods that reach beyond the average student in the ordinary setting. Once students have been exposed to a well-planned, comprehensive, intensive plan to prevent school failure along with immediate interventions if it does happen, they will be better able to function in school and ultimately in society.

It is, therefore, an important responsibility assigned to the administrator of the school to change the practices that have been tried in the past and failed. Shifts in policies and practice do not come easily, but the benefits definitely outweigh the problems of implementation. Restructuring causes changes in thinking and beliefs as well as in practice. Rethinking the purposes of learning and schooling and redefining learning in terms of task goals are necessary to

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obtain the transformation that is needed in our schools. By working together and by using the following recommendations, educators can make a change.

- 1. Findings of this investigation should be made available to school administrators.**
- 2. School officials need to be aware of the importance of: (a) early identification, (b) preventive measures, and (c) appropriate interventions for at-risk students.**
- 3. Each school should have a comprehensive, detailed plan for dealing with at-risk students that includes all individuals involved in the student's education.**
- 4. Schools should employ an integrated approach to science, social studies, writing and other subjects rather than teaching each subject in isolation.**
- 5. Learning needs to be made relevant to the student's life and needs.**
- 6. The principal's role as educational leader should be enhanced. Administrators should not be seen merely as managers as they were sometimes in the past.**
- 7. Everyone in the school should be working toward the same end. The principal should be the instructional leader, and there should be frequent discussion about progress being made. A school can not succeed if everyone is going in his/her own direction. It is important to have adopt a set of standards and adhere to them.**

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- 8. The atmosphere of the school is important. Students should understand that academics are valued. Students should be motivated by creating excitement about learning.**
- 9. It is important that the administrator work with other schools and outside agencies to provide for all of the needs of at-risk students.**
- 10. Up-to-date technology is important in educating at-risk students. All avenues of funding should be explored.**
- 11. A task focus, as opposed to an ability focus, should be used because it makes students feel good about what they're learning and leads to a continuing interest in learning even after formal instruction.**
- 12. The whole language approach to reading should be made available to all children.**
- 13. Increased staff development in the area of at-risk students is recommended.**
- 14. At-risk students used as helpers when possible increases their feeling of self-worth.**
- 15. Cooperative learning and continuous progress programs are recommended for use with at-risk students.**

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